

Nº 9

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THE CAPTIVE
OF BLACKMOOR
CASTLE



Sir Justin raised his mail-gloved fist as though to strike his helpless prisoner.
Still Will Scarlet defied him to do his worst.

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THE CAPTIVE OF BLACKMOOR CASTLE

CHAPTER 1.

Strange Happenings at the "Saracen's Head."

WHAT a night it was! The wind came roaring across forest and lonely wold. Every flower was dead; the birds had fled from the desolate region and settled near the villages and towns. The rivers, streams, and brooks were silent under thick masks of ice, there was a great hush throughout the white, cold land, and nature lay sleeping in the arms of her grim nurse, Winter.

There had been a lull in the storm during the day, but when the sun went down amid scudding clouds riven with great bands of red, and night set in, snow began to fall afresh, and the north wind lifted up its voice of thunder and bullied and blustered like the merciless tyrant it was.

With a rush and a roar, it swept through a wood, startling the young trees into making them wave their limbs frantically, while the older and sturdier ones groaned and bowed their heads like giants stricken in battle.

On it came, sweeping down upon the village of Blackmoor, round the great castle beyond and back again, driving Alfred Arden, of the "Saracen's Head," into his house and banging the door uncere- moniously after him.

There were about half a dozen customers in the kitchen, drinking ale and mead, and calling to mind other dreadful storms in bygone years which had

left death and destruction in their track.

"What a night it is, neighbours!" Arden said, throwing an armful of logs on the fire.

It hardly needed replenishing, for on the hearth was a great burning mass, filling the quaint apartment with a rich orange glow, but it seized upon the fresh fuel, and bursting, as it were, into a laugh of triumph, sent a great blaze halfway up the chimney.

No one answered Arden. Some were staying the night, so the weather did not concern them, but others had long, lonely walks before them, and were loth to turn their backs on the hospitable kitchen and the joyously-dancing fire, which made even the gloomy shadows merry and sent them racing along the walls.

Arden, seating himself in a great hollow-backed chair, yawned and gazed steadily at the massive beams supporting the ceiling. It suddenly occurred to him that if he did not talk his cus-

tomers would go to sleep, and as no man drinks when he sleeps, the house, in a financial sense of the word, would suffer.

"It's just three years ago to the very day—that poor Maine died."

"Died!" echoed a long, fair-bearded man, waking up suddenly. "Murdered, you mean. He was set upon in his own house and slain at the point of the sword. 'Tis said that his ghost walks the ramparts Blackmoor Castle whenever a storm rages."

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"By the rood, it must be there to-night," said another. "I'll go round by the back path, as I have no wish to meet a ghost in its grave-clothes."

"Sir Justin Antoine's men flung his body into the earth, as though it were the carcase of a dog, and at the next Court of Tenure, as you know, Sir Justin produced mortgages purporting to have been signed by Maine, which swept away the whole estate."

"Yes, I remember that," said a burly man, picking up a huge sheep-skin cloak. "The Court put Maine's miserable end to the result of a private quarrel, but—well, what does it matter?" he added, shrugging his shoulders. "It is the old story. Had Maine been a Norman, every Saxon would have been questioned out of his wits; but as he was a Saxon they just buried him and stole his property."

"But what puzzles me is what became of Maine's son," Arden continued, drumming his fingers thoughtfully upon his chin. "Most of you know what happened. When he was sent for, and told that his father's dead body lay on the hearth, he simply walked into the house, kissed the corpse, and taking with him his father's dagger, which lay on the floor, walked out again. From that day to this no man has ever seen or heard anything of him. What, are you going, shepherd?"

"Yes, it is time I was in bed, for the hour-glass must not turn many times before I am astir again. Good-night!"

As the shepherd pulled his great warm cloak around him and took a stout staff from a corner, the latch of the door opened, and a man looking like a moving mass of snow walked in. At the same moment the light of the fire showed some half-dozen troopers, who had alighted and were standing at their horses' heads.

The landlord and his guests stared in astonishment. No one had heard the newcomers arrive, but the depth of the snow might account for that; but why Sir Justin Antoine should honour the "Saracen's Head" with a call puzzled the company, and most of all the host.

Sir Antoine, having flung his cloak and fur-trimmed hat to his attendants,

walked into the kitchen and eyed each of the rustics with a searching glance.

"Sit still," he said, as they rose and moved away from him. "Arden, go you and help my men to see to the horses. We must remain here awhile."

Arden started and turned pale.

What to do with such a guest as the purse-proud, haughty knight he did not know; but he was still more troubled in his mind to find a cause for Sir Jasper's appearance at the inn.

"Sir Knight," he said, "I am entirely at your service; but, at the best, I can offer you but poor entertainment."

"I must make myself content," Sir Jasper replied, loosening his belt of black velvet embroidered with gold, and throwing it, with the sword attached, on the table. "I would have gone straight on to the castle, but the snow has drifted into the valleys, and the horses need rest."

"Gone on to the castle, Sir Knight?" Arden echoed. "Pardon me, but I understood that you were seen in the neighbourhood this very afternoon."

"I mean what I say," Sir Justin interrupted, with an angry flash of his eyes. "I started on a journey, but turned back again; and here I am in your house. What other explanation shall I give you? Who made it your business to inquire into my movements? Peace, fool, and give these gaping fellows something to drink!"

"Yes, yes, Sir Knight," Arden said, running out of the kitchen to conceal his rage at being called a fool.

"You know me well enough, I trow," Sir Jasper continued, seating himself and resting his elbow heavily on the table. "There is not a man among you to whom my face is not familiar; yet you stand staring, as if I had risen from the earth like a ghost!"

The simple-minded, honest peasants made no reply, but they knew Sir Justin Antoine well enough. They knew him to be a drunkard, a gambler, and a libertine. They knew him to be cruel, rapacious, unprincipled, selfish; studying no human being but himself, and trampling under his heel of iron any man who gave him real or imaginary cause for offence.

Backed up by tyrants as ruthless and tyrannical as himself, his greedy hands seized the moneys, cattle, and lands of the unhappy Saxons on the slightest pretence, and alas! there was no justice for them.

Thrice in as many years men had been foully done to death in the dead of night, and although the finger of suspicion pointed to Sir Justin, there was no evidence to bring the crimes direct to his door.

Presently Arden came back with a curiously-shaped bottle under one arm and a foaming jug of ale in the other.

"I thought, Sir Knight, that you would like to taste of the best wine in my cellar," he said. "It has lain there full twenty years, and if there be finer in the shire I know not where it be."

"You thought aright," Sir Justin said, smiling grimly. "Had I known that you possessed a store of wine upon which the sun has not shone for twenty years, I would have made friends with it long ere this. Fill me a goblet to the brim, and I will drink to the health of," patting himself on the chest and laughing, "him I love best in all the world. What of my horses, Arden?"

"They are already stabled and eating their feeds of corn."

"And my men?"

"They have taken ale and food with them into the stable."

"Good! Throw more logs on the fire. And as for you," Sir Justin added, turning to the peasants, "you may go when it pleases you. I am in the mood to sit alone until inclined to depart. Stay! one word. I have heard a report—an idle one, no doubt—but it is said that a man answering the description of Robin Hood, the rebel and traitor, has been seen in this neighbourhood. Is there one of you who has heard aught of it?"

The men had been whispering together, and now faced the knight.

"Blackmoor is fully seventy miles from Sherwood Forest," said one, "and Robin Hood is not likely to venture so far in mid-winter. He lives all through the dark months in a secret cave."

"How know you that, Sedgeward?" Sir Justin demanded.

"So at least I have heard," Sedgeward said. "But, by Hengist and Horsa! there are so many tales told of Robin Hood that, if but one half be true, he is the most wonderful man on earth."

"It is said that he gives money to the poor," a man chimed in. "If so, I wish he would come my way, for I am poor enough."

"What ingrates you churls are!" Sir Justin said. "You are never satisfied. You lost your country by arms stronger than your own, and, by laws of conquest, you have nothing. We have spared your lives, but still you grumble. Is not life a blessing?"

"Yes," Sedgeward responded. "Life is worth the having because there is still something to live for."

"What is that?" the Norman asked quickly.

"Hope."

"Go on hoping," Sir Justin Antoine said. "It costs nothing, harms no one, and is food and drink to some fools that buoy themselves up with it. Hear me a moment. To the man who brings me news that Robin Hood has been really seen within two leagues of Blackmoor Castle I will give as much land as he can measure with a sheep's skin, cut in strips an inch broad."

This offer did not appear to throw the peasants into ecstasies of delight. They filed out of the house one by one, and Arden being down in the cellar Sir Justin Antoine was left alone to the enjoyment of the wine and the roaring fire.

It was New Year's Eve, and the old year lay a-dying. On such a night three years ago Roderick Maine had been slain in his own house, and his son had vanished no man knew whither.

Sir Justin Antoine began to count on his fingers—One, two, three; then, stopping, he leaned forward as if he had turned chilly and wished to catch the full warmth of the blazing logs.

"Ho, there, Arden!" he cried, suddenly; "you may sit with me. I like it not that you should avoid me as though I were stricken with a pestilence. Bring some more of this excellent wine and share it with me."

"Nay, Sir Knight," replied Arden, appearing in the doorway. "Such a luxury is not for a poor man, yet will I quaff a measure of sound ale at your expense, for 'tis New Year's Eve——"

"I need not be reminded of it," Sir Justin interposed. "Why do fools rejoice because another year has gone, bringing them a year nearer to death?"

"Well, Sir Knight, they may think that the close of each year brings them nearer rest and peace."

"The prating of oily-tongued priests," Sir Justin sneered. "Rest, yes, because when a man is dead he is done with for ever."

"If that be so," said Arden, "there can be no such things as ghosts."

This proved an unlucky speech. For some reason best known to himself Sir Justin flew into a fit of rage and, leaping to his feet, was in the act of hurling the bottle at Arden's head when the outer door crashed open and two stalwart men entered.

"Are you deaf, host, that you did not hear us call?" the taller of the two demanded. "We shouted, but in vain, so were put to the trouble of finding a couple of loose boxes for our horses in your stables. You have a goodly company to-night."

"I heard you not, good sirs," Arden replied, looking wistfully at the newcomers; "but little wonder for it. The wind is making as much noise as thunder. What is your pleasure?"

"To stay here to-night, if you can accommodate us. You shake your head. Tush, man! You may put us in any place that is clean and warm."

Sir Justin Antoine looked up sharply.

"You are strangers to Blackmoor?"

"Yes and no. I have not been through the village for a long time; but it has undergone no change, and is not the sort of place where a man could easily lose himself."

The speaker and his companion were warmly clad. Cloaks, composed of martin and badger skins cunningly sewn and blended, descended from their shoulders to their heels; their hats were made of a kind of buckram, stiffened to resist the weather, and bearing no ornaments, but plain bands and buckles.

As they removed their cloaks they revealed plain but costly doublets and riding-boots reaching to their thighs.

They were a handsome pair, and even Sir Justin, whose suspicious nature was aroused, could not help admiring them as they, having ordered some wine, faced him at the table.

"Humph!" he said. "Your business must be of importance to bring you out in such weather. I crave your pardon for appearing rude, but I am master of Blackmoor, lord of the manor, and justice of the peace, and I, therefore, have the right to know your names and what brings you here."

"You hear that, Master Smithdale?" said the taller of the two strangers.

"I heard, Master Rutland," the other responded. "Here comes the wine, and we will drink to the dawn of a happier New Year than England has seen for a long time."

This calm way of practically ignoring his questions brought hot blood into Sir Justin Antoine's face.

"Will you not answer me?" he demanded.

"Yes," Smithdale replied, "you shall have an answer, and I leave you to make what you can out of it. You are lord of a manor; so am I, and so large a one that you might stow Blackmoor away in a corner of it. You are a justice of the peace; I, too, am a lover of justice, as those who offend me often find out to their cost."

"Ah! a threat!" Sir Justin Antoine said, forcing a laugh to his lips; then, with a sneer: "The name of Smithdale does not sound as if it belonged to a man of quality."

"A man of quality is often another name for a scoundrel."

"This to me?" Sir Justin exclaimed, starting to his feet and snatching up his sword.

"Why not?" Smithdale retorted, snapping his fingers in the knight's face. "Put up your blade, or you will find it crossed by mine."

"Your insolence shall cost you the stretching of your neck!" Sir Justin cried, turning crimson with rage. "I trow there is more of the freebooter than an honest man about you. Arden, rouse

up my men. I'll have this pair of rascals conveyed to my castle."

"Mine host will do well to stay where he is," Smithdale said, laughing contemptuously. "Proud Norman, since you will not use your sword, thus do I treat you."

As he spoke Smithdale snatched up a goblet half-filled with wine and flung it straight into the Norman's face.

Arden was in a terrible state. He saw very plainly what must happen unless timely intervention prevented the brawl, but he was powerless to leave his house, for Smithdale's companion now barred the way to the door.

"Peace, I pray you!" he cried, running between the two angry men. "In the name of mercy and good will, let there be peace!"

Temporarily blinded by the wine, and smarting under the insult, Sir Justin made a furious lunge at Smithdale, but, to the knight's astonishment and dismay, he felt a sudden spraining of his wrist, and his sword went spinning up to the ceiling.

"That is a little trick I thought you would be prepared for," Smithdale said, smiling. "You are but a poor swordsman after all, Sir Knight, and a hogward might trounce you with a switch. Ho, there!"

In answer to his sudden cry the door opened and a man of gigantic stature, armed with an axe, stepped in, followed by another of lesser and slimmer build, who wore a long cloak with a hood, which was completely drawn over his face.

"Guard well the door, honest John," said Smithdale. "Here we have a little reckoning to settle, with which our honest host has nothing to do."

"What means this?" Sir Justin stammered, turning livid as he picked up his sword.

"It means," said Smithdale, "that I may as well declare myself by my real name and intentions. I am Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest!"

"Heaven have mercy on us! I almost guessed it from the first!" gasped Arden, so overcome that he staggered back and leaned heavily against the wall.

"Ay, it is true," Robin Hood replied; "and the gentleman who came with me is known as Denis Haxtell, the Dane. Yonder burly henchman of mine is no other than Little John, and the other is—— But he shall declare himself."

"I am Roderick Maine!" cried the man last spoken to, throwing back his hood. "Yes, Sir Justin, I am Roderick Maine, the son of the man you so foully slew, and I am here for vengeance!"

"Welcome, Roderick — a thousand welcomes!" Arden cried, springing forward, and forgetting all else but his joy at seeing the young man again. "We had given you up for lost! Noble son of a noble man, this house shall be your home, if you will it so, in spite of all the Normans in the land!"

"There is yet another friend anxious to enter," Little John said, dropping the head of his axe with a ringing crash on the floor; "and since he has but little hair, and wears sandals on his feet, it were a sin to keep him in the cold."

"Let him come in," Robin Hood said. The door opened, and the renowned Friar Tuck entered, apparently very feeble, and leaning on his quarter-staff.

"Here's weather for a man of peace to be in," he said, spreading his hands open and rolling up his eyes. "But what is this I see? Angry glances and white faces! Oh, my friends, it is awful to fight. Well was it indeed that I had the forethought to push a cart against the great stable-door, for there are men within, and I feared they were armed."

Sir Justin Antoine's face underwent a succession of quick and awful changes. It seemed like a dream to him, this array of men who had fallen, as it were, from the clouds. Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck, whose names were as familiar in the mouths of the people as household words; but, worst of all to him, Roderick Maine, now grown into a muscular young fellow, as straight as an arrow, and his head and neck well poised upon his shoulders.

What ill fate had brought him (Sir Justin) to the inn? He had been

caught in a trap, and his men were powerless to help him, for even now they were shouting and hammering at the stable-door, but were as secure as if they were lodged in the deepest dungeon of Blackmoor Castle.

The Norman knight riveted his eyes on Roderick Maine's.

"You accuse me of your father's murder," he said, "but accusation is no proof. Tush, lad! I am sorry to see you in such company. Let us be friends, and if there be aught that I can put right, come to my castle, and we will talk the matter over."

Roderick Maine laughed in his face.

"I know what kind of reception would meet me there," he said. "You ask me for proofs. In my father's dead hand was a piece of silk torn from the surcoat of a Norman nobleman. It bears a red dragon—part of your arms, Sir Justin, and that is sufficient proof to me. And here," he cried, his eyes leaping into a sudden flame, "is the dagger with which my father defended himself until death came upon him; and with it thus do I avenge his murder!"

Blind to the fact that Sir Justin's sword was pointed to his breast, Roderick sprang at the knight; but Robin Hood caught him by the arm and swung him round.

"Nay, Roderick," said the outlaw, "this will never do. I will not see you throw your life away. You came to me when you were a wanderer on the face of the earth, and I have taken good care of you, in the hope that you might meet this man face to face. The hour has come. Fight him you shall; but on equal terms; and I doubt not but that Heaven will defend the right. Here, take my sword, and have at him."

"I'll not fight," Sir Justin said.

"Then, by the powers of light, you shall lose your head!" Robin Hood cried.

"Ho, there, Arden, bring your chopping-block, and Little John shall crop this knave's neck close to his shoulders!"

"This," said Friar Tuck, plumping himself down with startling suddenness

in a chair, "is a most dreadful thing for a man of peace to hear! Faith! and it is a cold night to be shaved!"

"Chief," said Little John, stepping forward, "there must be no delay. Those fellows in the stable have fixed up something to act as a battering-ram, and they will have the door down soon."

"In that case," said Friar Tuck, displaying sudden agility, "it is time that the man of peace went forth with his quarter-staff to see what sort of music it can ring from steel caps and thick skulls. I'll not stay to see the fight, Robin, but wait for you outside."

CHAPTER 2.

A Duel to the Death.—The Horrors of Blackmoor Castle.

QUITTING the inn Friar Tuck slipped through the snow as nimbly as a dancing-master.

The friar was a man of many parts and great fortitude. Age had made but little difference to his strength and endurance, and his immense frame was answerable for his apparent stoutness.

His heart was as fresh and young as when it beat within his breast at the age of twenty, and the muscles and thews of his arms were as strong as bands of wrought steel.

Sir Justin's men had just made a hole in the stable-door when the friar, chuckling to himself, climbed into the cart he had pushed up with his own hands.

"A pestilence seize the varlets who have played us this trick!" grumbled a thick, husky voice. "Stand aside a moment, and I will see what obstructs the way."

Then a head came through, but it shot back like a flash, and so sore and swollen that its owner rolled amid the straw and lay kicking as though seized with a fit.

"Friends," said Friar Tuck, "I am a man of peace, and fain would I be at peace with you; but still I like not the look of you, and you'd best keep inside."

"Who are you?" one of the henchmen cried.

"A humble man known as Friar Tuck," was the reply. "Let me see but another head, and it shall be fit for nothing but sticking on a pole to frighten rooks from a cornfield."

This explanation had the desired effect.

Friar Tuck was held in almost as much terror as Robin Hood, and was often spoken of as "the devil in a cassock."

Ballads describing his adventures and doughty deeds were composed and sung at the country fairs, and many a mountebank owed his supper and night's lodging to a tale he had picked up about the merry monk.

While Friar Tuck kept close watch and ward over the men in the stable a strange scene was being enacted in the great kitchen of the "Saracen's Head."

Although nearly frightened out of his wits, Arden rejoiced at seeing Sir Justin so neatly cornered.

"I call you all to bear witness that I am acting under threats," he said. "I feel that if I do not obey my own life is in danger, so I will fetch the chopping-block. Ah, me! Little did I ever dream that a Norman nobleman would be doomed to execution in my peaceful home."

"Stay!" Sir Justin cried. "It becomes me to die fighting rather than to be murdered in cold blood by this rabble. I have heard that Robin Hood is a lover of fair play."

"That is no lie, as you shall find, if you play the part of a man," the outlaw replied. "Stand aside! Give the combatants room and hamper them not."

Sir Justin and Roderick Maine then stepped forward to meet each other. Their eyes were on a level, but otherwise there was a great disparity between them.

The young Saxon was slim and still in his teens, but life in the forest and training under Robin Hood had done much for him. Sir Justin, fully twelve years older than his rival, was broad-shouldered, of somewhat heavy build, and of great strength.

He was also renowned for his skill as a swordsman, which he often boasted

of himself; hence his rage and wonderment at being so easily disarmed by Robin Hood.

The Norman saw that his great chance lay in making the conflict as short as possible, and no sooner had he crossed swords with Roderick Maine than he beat down the latter's blade and, rushing in, delivered a sweeping cut of such force that his weapon hissed as it sped through the air.

Had the blow taken effect Roderick Maine's head would have followed the course of the great glittering blade; but, having been tutored to be wary of such tactics, the young man dropped lightly on one knee and sprang up as Sir Justin staggered wildly past him.

"Well done, Roderick!" exclaimed Robin Hood, clapping his hands. "You have learnt your lessons well, lad. Now, show him that you remember yet another. At him, boy!"

Sir Justin lost no time.

Gathering himself up for a second attack, he took his sword in both hands and, whirling it in a bewildering fashion round his head, measured his distance and struck.

The sword passed clean over Maine's back and splintered to shivers on the floor, while the Norman, impaled by the youngster's blade, fell forward, groaning, and rolled over on his face.

"It is over! Retribution has overtaken him," Robin Hood said. "Carry him out, Little John, place him in the snow, and then let his men find him. They must not know that this took place at the inn, for it would be a shame to let Arden suffer innocently. Friend host, here is gold for you, and should evil threaten you fly to Sherwood Forest. Quick! We must away. Friend Haxtell, lend a hand with the horses. Ho there, Friar Tuck!" he shouted, running to the door. "How fares it with you?"

"The man of peace is more comfortable than his cage full of birds," the friar replied. "Are you ready? Yes! Then I'll but stay to warn these darlings not to show their sweet faces until they have counted twice a hundred. What of the bold knight?"

"He has fought his duel and lost it."

"You hear!" said Friar Tuck, thrusting his quarter-staff through the hole in the door. "Your lord and master has been foolish enough to pick a quarrel with a peaceful friend of mine, and has paid the penalty. Stay where you are until you hear the sound of a horn, and then you may come forth. But hurry not, you scullions, for Robin Hood is nigh with his archers."

The imprisoned men set up a dismal cry.

Robin Hood! All was lost, then. Terror benumbed their hearts. The demon freebooter, as they held the brave King of Sherwood Forest to be, was within call, and they seemed to feel the shafts from his invincible bow passing through their bodies.

"Mercy! pity!" one exclaimed. "We have done no harm. We are but the servants of Sir Justin Antoine."

No reply was vouchsafed him. Friar Tuck was already on horseback and away with his friends.

Suddenly Arden's voice was heard.

"Bring a lantern here," he cried, in heartrending accents. "Ah! woe is me. These unhappy men have been fighting. The snow is red with blood! Sir Justin Antoine is slain."

Then the henchmen, gathering courage, struck down the door with the piece of timber they had torn from the stable and, crawling under the cart, saw Arden kneeling beside the body of the knight.

"Rascal!" cried one. "You connived at this!"

"I!" exclaimed the host of the "Saracen's Head." "Heaven forbid! Some men came down upon my house like a swarm of bees. Angry words passed between one of them and Sir Justin, and this is the result. The castle is not far away; so away with him and summon the leech. There may be life in him yet, though his face be as white as the snow. Tarry not, but do as I tell you. Place him on a horse and away."

At that moment there came the sound of a loud and triumphant blast of a horn.

While some ran to bring a horse from the stable Arden fetched some spirit

and dribbled it in through the knight's teeth—not that he believed it would revive him, for he fully believed that Sir Justin was dead.

With as little delay and confusion as possible the henchmen prepared to depart. One, mounting the strongest horse, took the limp body of Sir Justin in his arms, and then all set forward, blundering and stumbling through the snow towards Blackmoor Castle.

Arden stood still until they had passed out of sight.

"What a night this has been!" he said, pressing his hand to his brow. "Robin Hood here! Roderick Maine returned! Sir Justin Antoine slain! My faith, it cannot be real. I must be dreaming. But no. Ugh! Those ugly red stains on the snow are real enough, and there are some in the kitchen, which I must get rid of."

He had got halfway to the house when he turned back.

"I forget," he said. "When Robin Hood and his followers arrived, one of my men was about. John! John! Where are you?"

A low, gurgling, and somewhat blood-curdling sound answered him, and then, peering through the falling snow, he saw what appeared to be a huge bundle tied to a post, used for temporarily tethering horses. This was John, the ostler.

He was so bound to the post that he looked part and parcel of it. His mouth was gagged with a woollen muffler, and his eyes were standing out of his head with fright, and the whiteness of his face was in strange contrast with the redness of his nose, which had begun to freeze.

"Who did this?" Arden demanded, removing the gag and cutting the cords. "Why, man, you are almost as stiff as the post. Stretch your limbs—stretch your limbs."

"It was done by a fat varlet with a shaven crown, who called himself a man of peace," John responded, with a groan. "He pounced on me, twisted me in his hands like a wisp of straw, trussed me up as you found me, and then whispered in my ear, 'You will live to thank a man of peace for keep-

ing you out of danger.' But only let him come near here again, and I'll find a way to his ribs with a pitchfork, be he priest or peasant."

"Get you to bed and think no more of it," said Arden, laughing in his sleeve. "The man spake sooth, for there has been terrible doings here, and it were well that your face was turned away from the house, or you would have died out of sheer fright."

"By the saints, I heard enough to last me as long as I live," the man replied as he shuffled to his quarters. "I never knew what it was to have such evil treatment before. I'll rest without dreaming."

"I'll bring you a hot drink before you close your eyes," Arden said. "But what are you staring at? What is that in your hand?"

"I never noticed it before," the man replied. "It's a golden noble, and, unless a miracle has been worked, it must have been slipped into my half-clenched hand."

"Trust me, that gold does not fall from heaven," said Arden. "You owe your good fortune to the man of peace with the shaven crown."

"He nearly made a man of peace of me for ever," growled the other. "But I suppose I must forgive him. Do not forget the drink, master. Let it be hot and plentiful!"

While the ostler was sleeping soundly, and Arden was removing every sign of the conflict from his premises, Sir Justin Antoine lay, stripped of his clothes, on a bed in Blackmoor Castle.

The leech, or doctor, attached to the castle was soon in attendance. He was a grave man, gnarled like an oak, bent almost double with the weight of his years, and so deeply skilled in medicine and surgery that he was held as a wizard.

With wrinkled but steady hands he dressed and bound up the dreadful sword-wound, lifted the knight's lids with one hand, resting the other the while on his heart.

"Bring me the best burnished shield in the castle," he said to his assistant.

The man took a small white shield from the wall, and having polished it

with his arm passed it to the learned man.

"It is strange that you should ask for such a thing, Pygoras," he remarked, addressing the leech by the high-sounding name he had adopted.

"Wait! You shall see the reason. Now raise Sir Justin up, so that he is in a sitting position."

When this was done Pygoras, holding the shield close to the knight's lips, struck him smartly on the back, and then paused, scarcely seeming to breathe himself.

Suddenly a cry of triumph burst from his lips.

"He lives!" he said. "See you not that the surface of the shield is dull? Does that not show he lives? Lower him again! Softly, softly! Now for my elixir—the elixir of life, the discovery of which has cost me so many years!"

It was merely a spirit distilled from wheat, a kind of rough brandy; but Pygoras boasted that he had wrested the secret from a magician, and the people believed him, as in those days they believed in anything that savoured of the mysterious.

Taking a flat, blunt-edged knife, he forced open Sir Justin's teeth and poured some of the elixir down his throat, and presently a slight shudder went through his frame.

"He will live! I have saved him! Pygoras the Great has saved him!" the old man cried boastfully. "Quick with the swathings! Heat them well! Pass me yonder bowl and watch him well while I bathe him with the lotion drawn from the very heart of mystic herbs."

With such talk did Pygoras continue his attentions, while his assistant, a simple-minded fellow, turning sick at heart at the smell of strong vinegar and water, with which his master laved Sir Justin's face, stood tremblingly by.

At length there came from Sir Justin's lips a deep-drawn sigh, and he opened his eyes slowly, like a man waking from a dreadful dream.

"Hush!" Pygoras whispered. "He is coming back from the land of the dead! I am restoring him to life."

So spoke the old impostor as Sir Justin stared about him, but seeing nothing, feeling nothing but an icy weight upon his heart, and hearing nothing but a dull sound, like the roaring of the sea in the distance.

Pygoras had placed one arm round the knight, and now gently, inch by inch, lowered his head to the pillow.

"You may go now, Photell," he said. "I will watch by my patient alone, for, perchance, I may have reason to utter such words as no man but myself must hear. And, Photell, you will do well to pray that you may never offend me, lest I place a spell upon you."

"The saints forbid!" Photell gasped. "You are indeed Pygoras the Great! You are more than mortal!"

He fled precipitately, spreading the news through the castle, and that night the name of Pygoras was whispered in awe and wonder.

And all through that dreary night the white-bearded leech sat at Sir Justin's side, never removing his eyes from him, never moving save to administer the "elixir," or to turn the hour-glass that stood near to his hand.

The wind roared, and the snow still fell. It was a night of tempest and destruction.

The swollen waters of the moat burst their icy bonds and became a troubled sea. Lower and lower the clouds descended, until their ragged edges trailed like the shadowy garbs of phantoms across the white earth.

Mighty and strong as Blackmore Castle was, it trembled to its foundation of solid stone, and from its depths of impenetrable darkness there came strange and awful sounds. Such sounds they were as to appal the strongest and strike terror into the most hardened heart.

At first they came with a hollow rumble like the echo of fists beating upon something hollow, and then rising to despairing wails and shrieks, such as mortal never heard without starting and turning pale.

In the castle hall there sat a coarse, short-bearded man, wearing a russet-brown doublet with a metal badge upon his breast, stamped with the arms of

the Antoinnes. A flat cap lolled over his half-opened eyes, which appeared to be focussed upon his great feet.

But this man, called Wolf-fang, on account of his pointed teeth, was, in reality, asleep—or as much asleep as he ever allowed himself to be, for Wolf-fang was custodian of the dungeons and always on the alert.

As the terrible noises increased he began to stir himself and looked slowly round the lodge.

A log-fire was roaring defiance to the inclement weather, and making Wolf-fang's shadow take the most fantastic forms, and hurling it into all sorts of odd places.

Now it ran along the floor, then it leaped to the groined roof, and again it flitted round the walls, breaking into patches, rejoining, expanding, contracting, dancing, and wobbling, according to the sport of the flickering tongues of the flames.

Wolf-fang had seen Sir Justin Antoine brought in for dead, and mourned for him, for his master was a man after his own heart.

As yet the news of the knight's probable recovery had not reached him, and to drown his sorrow Wolf-fang had treated himself to a huge flagon of strong ale.

Suddenly he roused himself, and taking a lighted lantern and a short-handled whip, fitted with several lashes of braided coil and wire, he opened his gaping mouth and grinned.

"I have had so much to think about," he muttered, "that I quite forgot to give my chickens their supper. How they cackle! By Pluto! they shall howl before they eat."

In a corner of the lodge was a great basket filled with crusts of bread, scraps of meat, and bones, such as a well-fed dog would turn its nose up at.

This Wolf-fang swung upon his shoulder, and stopping only to see whether his bunch of keys were in his belt, he passed out of the lodge and went striding down a long corridor, with here and there a barred loophole pierced in the massive masonry.

Beyond this wall was the open courtyard, almost choked with snow, and

hundreds of flakes driven by the wind came through the loophole and danced in front and round about Wolf-fang.

"A murrain on such weather!" he growled. "I never heard the like of the wind to-night. There'll be no leaving the castle for some days. Howl away, you dogs; you'll make more noise before I have done with you."

The cries and yells were now falling loudly on his ears, for the floor of the corridor inclined downwards and ended at a flight of stone stairs.

Wolf-fang rubbed his shoes hard on the flooring as a precaution against slipping, for the stairs were wet and slippery.

"Silence there, you hounds!" he roared, in a voice of thunder. "I am coming to feed your mouths—and backs, too, I promise. Away! Back from the door, or I'll mark your faces with more scars than you have fingers."

By the time he had finished blustering and threatening he had reached the last stair, and stood opposite to what appeared to be the door of a huge oven.

Lowering the basket, Wolf-fang, still breathing threats and curses, selected a key from the bunch, and unlocking the door, struck wildly with his whip into the darkness beyond.

There was a shriek and a scampering of feet, whereat the villain laughed.

"I'll teach you manners, curs that you are!" he said, kicking the great basket in front of him, and swinging the lantern high above his head. "I'll teach you to rouse an honest man from his sleep by your yelling."

The dim light of the lantern fell upon four horribly attenuated and scarcely human forms. Half-clad with a few rags, grizzled, dirt-begrimed, hollow-eyed, and famished, they looked more like huge apes than men. Here in this foul dungeon, dark and wet, they were doomed to exist until death came kindly to their rescue.

But a month back there had been ten, but now only four were left—four men of shrivelled skin and protruding bones, who had forgotten what the light of the sun was like.

These men were Saxons, the victims of the tyrant of Blackmoor Castle. One

by one they had been handed over to Wolf-fang for safe-keeping, and he had never failed to fulfil his trust.

Lies were invented to account for the disappearance of the unhappy yeomen, torn from their hearths and homes, from wives and children.

Closing the door with his foot, Wolf-fang plied his whip until the four hapless wretches crouched snarling and whining in a corner; and then he overturned the basket in the middle of the floor.

"You know what I say to you," the scoundrel said, shaking his whip. "Don't let me hear another sound from you for four-and-twenty hours, or I'll cut your backs to ribbons!"

Wolf-fang now departed, for he had other calls to make. Returning to his lodge, he filled another but much daintier basket with food of quite a different description. There was a fowl well roasted, white bread cut into thin slices, cheese made of pure cream and moulded into a tempting shape, a bottle of wine, and a glass—a great rarity in those days.

"How the poor bird beats her wings against the golden bars of her cage!" Wolf-fang said. "To-morrow, perchance, she will go free; or if Sir Justin is dead there'll be no need to keep her. Who goes there?"

"It is I—Photell, assistant to Pygoras the Great," replied a voice.

"May the foul fiend fly away with Pygoras the Great, and you, too!" Wolf-fang responded with an oath. "What are you prowling about at this time for?"

"To tell you that my most reverend and magical master has saved Sir Justin Antoine," Photell rejoined. "Is it not wonderful? Is it not marvellous?"

Wolf-fang put the basket down and looked steadily at the leech's assistant.

"I have always thought what I know to be true now," he said.

"And, pray you, what is that?" Photell demanded.

"That your master has more dealings with devils than angels. Stand aside, for, talking of angels, I have here something for an angel—at least, as far as form and beauty are concerned. Poor

"Gwendolinel I pity her, but what a fool she is! If I were her I would consent to wed Sir Justin and poison him afterwards."

CHAPTER 3.

A Gentleman in Black.

WHERE were the snow, the deep drifts, the biting wind, and the great masses of ugly ice?

All gone. With one touch of his magical wand, golden-haired and rosy-cheeked Spring had worked a transformation in everything that grew and moved on the face of the earth.

The glades became gorgeous carpets of primroses, violets, and bluebells. The trees shook the emerald leaves from the husks, and out of every bush the black-birds and thrushes darted with "loud, glad cries."

Where the pure streams ran bubbling and hurrying between verdant banks, there the keen-eyed kingfisher darted with many a flash of green and gold.

The trout and grayling had left the spawning shallows, and now rose to the gauzy-winged flies, whose lives were cut short almost as soon as they came into existence.

Great butterflies in all their majesty of scarlet, black, blue, and gold, settled on the flowers and leisurely closed and expanded their wings.

They were in no hurry, for the long, bright summer was before them, and it was the same with all, for the winter was over, and the voice of the turtle dove was heard in the land.

It was morning in the great forest of Sherwood.

A herd of deer with their young, led by a noble buck, came forth to greet the rising sun, and to crop the short dewy grass.

Now to the pool they went to drink, dipping their velvety muzzles daintily in the water, while their lord and champion stood rigid, watchful, and proud, his ears pricked, and his beautiful limbs as straight as the bows of the mountain-ash that sheltered him.

Suddenly he uttered a cry, and away went the four-footed mothers and their startled children, vanishing like so

many dim shadows when the sun suddenly burst through the mists.

Something came speeding through the trees, a small, white, feathered streak, and an arrow, piercing the buck full in the chest, brought him to his knees.

The poor beast uttered no cry of pain. Like a human hero covering the retreat of women and children, he bore his great agony without a moan.

Then came another shaft, striking the buck in the flank, rolling him over. He gave a despairing yet half-hopeful glance in the direction the loved ones had gone, and then sinking his noble head to the earth, lay down to die.

Half a minute later Robin Hood, carrying his bow in his left hand, and with his two hounds, Vulcan and Hector, panting with suppressed excitement at his heels, came running up.

When within a few paces of the dying buck, Robin Hood halted and drew his hunting-knife, for such a creature when wounded was extremely dangerous, and would often leap to its feet and attack both men and hounds with the courage of desperation.

"Down, Vulcan! Down, Hector!" Robin Hood said. "Keep your sharp teeth for another time. The poor fellow is at his last gasp."

It was true, for the next minute the buck was dead.

Robin Hood was touched at the sight. It was not in his nature to slay any creature wantonly; but there were many mouths to feed, the winter had been hard, and life in the deep caves had proved irksome.

He was in the act of putting a silver bugle-horn to his lips, when he started perceptibly.

The hounds crouching at his feet were growling ominously, but Robin Hood paid but little heed to them. He had discharged but one arrow, and there were two in the dead beast's body. His own lay more than half-embedded in the buck's chest; the other stuck in the flank—a thick, strong, deadly shaft, such as must have come from a powerful cross-bow.

"This passes my comprehension," he said. "I have heard of no stranger being sighted in this part of the forest

for many weeks, but stranger there must be."

Slipping a leash into the collars of the hounds, he dragged them behind an oak, and giving them a sign to be silent, lay down and watched.

He, too, was being watched at a distance, by a tall man dressed in doublet and hose of black, and long brown boots with wide, flapping tops.

Resting his cross-bow upon his shoulder, this man tugged at his pointed beard with one hand, and shading his eyes with the other, seemed puzzled.

"I do not recognise the fellow," he mused. "My eyes are not so good as they were ten years ago. He has a pair of noble hounds with him, and, perchance, he is one of Lord Glandstrad's guests, who has come out early to shoot. My faith! the bolt from my cross-bow has set him wondering and given him a fright, for he is gone. Perchance he takes me for a robber."

As he advanced towards the dead buck Robin Hood, bidding his hounds be quiet, emerged from behind the tree and doffed his plumed cap.

"Sir Stranger," he said pleasantly, "it would seem that we are both in the same mind, but as this is my domain I must claim the prize."

"Your domain!" echoed the man in black. "By the rood, if I mistake not, I am in the forest of Sherwood."

"That makes my claim the greater," Robin Hood rejoined, laughing.

"How can that be? Listen, sir. I see that you wear the Lincoln green of a forester, but the fashion of your attire proclaims you to be a man of some quality. Let us know each other. I am Humbert Landford, a newly-appointed justice of the peace of the city of Nottingham."

"Behold in me, then, a servant to justice, and such a lover of it that I wear the scars of wounds received in its honourable cause."

"We should be friends, then," Landford said, half-suspiciously, his eyes roving towards the dead buck. "You have fought in the wars, I suppose?"

"I have fought so many battles that I have forgotten one-half of them," Robin Hood replied.

"That sounds like a boast."

"Nay. It is but the simple truth."

"So be it, then," said Landford. "I will take it for granted that you are a mighty warrior. But who gave you permission to shoot in the forest?"

"The question would have come more aptly from my lips," Robin Hood said. "A king does not ask permission of his subjects."

"A king! You talk in riddles."

"Not so, for I am Robin Hood, King of Sherwood Forest!"

Humbert Landford started back.

"You are the man that Lord Glandstrad, the new sheriff of Nottingham, told me of!" he cried. "You a king! You are naught but a rebel."

"It is too early in the day to quarrel," Robin Hood said, "or I would show you who, at least, is master. You talk of Lord Glandstrad. I have not yet the pleasure of his acquaintance, but I knew his predecessor, Oswald de Burgh, too well for his comfort. I present my compliments to the new sheriff, and so long as he does not molest me, or inflict injustice on the Saxons, we shall be very good friends."

Landford stood still and stared, as if he could not believe what he heard.

"By Heaven," he said, "these are the most insolent words that ever came to my ears."

"Take care of your ears, then, lest you lose them," Robin Hood retorted.

"Away, sir. Some of my men will be here presently, and I tell you they like not the name of justice as the Normans understand it. They are good fellows at heart, but they might think it sport to chase you through the forest, and even to duck you in a pond. I have known such things happen."

Landford's face grew almost as dark as his beard.

"Would that I had brought some of my attendants with me!" he said, "for then I trow you would have found a more civil use for your tongue."

"I would you had," Robin Hood returned, with imperturbable coolness.

"It is some months since that I have seen a band of Normans running for their lives; the forest has no attraction for them when there are a few inches of

snow on the ground. Like their hearts, their feet grow cold, I suppose. But go you, sir, and fetch your attendants, and the more you bring the merrier shall it be for me."

Humbert Landford discovered that he had met his match and would gain nothing by losing his temper.

"You are a bold knave," he said, forcing a laugh to his lips. "There is a price set upon your head."

"Prince John set that price, but my head sits firmer on my shoulders than his," the outlaw responded. "Prince, indeed! Pshaw! I never met a snapping cur with so vile a nature, for it is not often that even a cur turns and bites the hand that feeds him. I have as great a contempt for him as I have love for his brother Richard. But enough! Pray leave me alone. I am in a mood to drink the sweet air of this glorious morning."

"I go," Landford said; "but we shall meet again, and in a place where you will tell a different story."

"My faith!" cried Robin Hood, laughing; "were I not a lenient and good-natured king, I should put you beyond telling any story at all. Pshaw! about your business! There are always boys to be whipped for playing in the streets of Nottingham when they should be in bed, old men and women to be fined for picking up sticks too near the castle, and taxes to be collected from the starving. Justice! Peace! Justice of the peace! I take off my hat to you. Ha, ha, ha!"

Humbert Landford turned and strode away in a fury.

"The villain shall be dragged through Nottingham on a hurdle to the gibbet for this!" he hissed, low down in his choking throat. "The people tell no lies. He is the most insolent knave that was ever allowed to live!"

He walked swiftly for about a hundred yards towards the place where he had tethered his horse, and then turned.

Robin Hood was sitting at the side of the dead buck, and looking in the opposite direction.

Humbert Landford put his hand to his ear and listened. He could hear

nothing but such sounds as were always in the forest in the heyday of spring-time.

There was not a soul in sight save himself and the outlaw; no one to cry out against a cowardly deed; no one to witness the sudden fall or hear the death-cry of a man foully done to death.

There was a bolt in his cross-bow, the string was fixed, and it needed only the pressure of a finger to still the voice of Robin Hood for ever.

Landford put the butt of the bow to his shoulder; the string twanged as the arch of steel stiffened and throbbed as it sent the bolt on its journey.

Like a gleam of lightning it flew; the aim was true, but Robin Hood's head sank suddenly, and the messenger of death passed harmlessly over him.

In a moment the outlaw was on his feet, and in another an arrow was fixed to his bow.

"Hold!" he thundered. "Stand still, or this shaft shall pierce your heart. Throw down your cross-bow, base churl, or your hand shall never grasp it again. Look out for your life, base dog!"

Robin Hood advanced quickly as he spoke, and halted within easy speaking distance of the baffled Norman.

"It was an accident," Landford said sullenly, as he hurled the cross-bow at his feet.

"I'll show you such another, but still a truer one," Robin Hood cried. "Put your arms to your sides. My thanks; I see that you have learnt some lessons in obedience."

Robin Hood put his horn to his lips, and sounded such a ringing blast that the forest re-echoed again and yet again.

The answer soon came, and presently Little John, Will Scarlet, with Friar Tuck puffing and blowing in the rear, appeared.

"A fine fat buck!" quoth the friar, smacking his lips. "St. Anthony is good to us. I have not seen such a prime lump of venison for many a day."

"Peace!" Little John growled. "Robin Hood wants us for something more than to carry the buck home. Yonder he stands, and in a fighting attitude, too. Ho, there! chief, we are

coming! Forward, good Scarlet; your legs are longest and slimmest."

"By the rood, Robin Hood has captured a gentleman in black!" Will exclaimed.

"The devil, perchance!" said the friar. "I swear that the Evil One always takes flight when Robin draws near! What luck if he should have caught him in earnest!"

"If a sinner like me talked in such a strain, he would hear nothing else but penances," Little John said. "Friar, be just, and sentence yourself to bread and water for a month!"

"This way, lads!" Robin Hood cried. "You see yonder fellow? He is a justice of the peace, and has tried to murder me. Poor fool! I was looking at him all the time; but I will be merciful. Master Landford, in my younger days I was taught to hold up my right hand when I craved a favour; so hold up yours."

Humbert Landford had no other alternative left, so up went his right hand.

"Say this after me," the outlaw said. "I am deeply sorry for shooting in so cowardly a manner at Robin Hood, who I acknowledge King of Sherwood Forest, and I have so great a contempt for myself that I deserve to be kicked through the forest."

White, and almost choking with rage and terror, Humbert Landford stammered through the speech.

"You have done so well that you shall have a reward," Robin Hood said. "Take it, and carry it about with you as long as you live."

Landford uttered a cry and staggered wildly as an arrow pierced his hand.

Filled with anguish, he wrenched it out, tore the lace collar from his neck, and bound it round the wound to stanch the blood.

"Away now!" Robin Hood said sternly. "I have another arrow ready, and should it take wing it will not alight in so harmless a place. Take with you a keepsake. I promise it will not wear out, and it will be always something to hold me in remembrance."

Baffled, filled with pain and fury, the Norman ran to his horse, and, climbing

into the saddle, dashed away at full gallop.

"It were a pity to let such a villain escape with his life," Little John said surly. "It is not a far cry to Nottingham, and he will soon rouse up the full pack of bloodhounds."

"Such is my desire," replied Robin Hood, laughing. "Tell me, Little John, what you like better than fighting, and I will tell you of another wonder of the world. Come, lads, we will skin the buck and carry off the prime joints. Ho, there, Vulcan! Ho, there, Hector! Good fellows! Brave dogs to lie so quiet when your master commands."

Such parts of the buck as were required were soon dismembered and placed on a litter made of entwined branches.

"Come," said Robin, "we'll to breakfast. Many friends should come to us to-day, and welcome they shall be."

CHAPTER 4.

A Wandering Minstrel.

A WALK of two miles, through lovely paths, brought the outlaws to one of their summer retreats, and as they drew near they heard the sounds of girlish laughter.

Maid Marian and her attendants were dancing in the lightness and gladness of their hearts on the green and yielding sward.

For the reign of winter was over, spring had come again, and the sweet songs such as only Nature sings were ringing through Sherwood Forest.

A wandering harpist had come on the scene, a man who played with taste. Then in came Tom Ringer, Dick Driver, Ned Carter, and Much the Miller's son, laden with wild ducks, turkeys, and black game.

"A feast!—a feast, I declare!" cried Friar Tuck.

"But who is that man?" demanded Robin Hood, fixing his eyes on the harpist. "It is strange that he should find his way here without a guide."

"My name is Welstone, and I am a Saxon born and bred," replied the musician, ceasing playing. "Pardon,

to tell. At the end of last year my daughter, Gwendoline, started on a journey to Blackmoor to visit a relative. The distance was not far, so I let her go alone; but, ah!—woe is me!—she never returned!"

"Say on," Robin Hood said. "She started for Blackmoor, eh?"

"Ay, and on the day previous to the dreadful wound Sir Justin Antoine received."

"Wound!" exclaimed Roderick Maine, leaning over the horse's neck. "Is the villain not dead?"

"No," Lorraine replied. "The wound was not fatal. His physician, Pygoras, healed him, and the Norman people sing the praises of Pygoras as though he were a god."

"By Heaven! there is something in dreams, after all," Robin Hood said. "Keep calm, Roderick; the day of vengeance is but put back. Proceed, friend Lorraine."

"For weeks and weeks, while Sir Justin lay sick, I sought my daughter, even to the castle gates, but in vain. I had begun to grieve for her as dead, when one Wolf-fang, the keeper of the dungeons of Blackmoor Castle, confessed, when in his cups, that Sir Justin had stolen my daughter."

"And she is at the castle still?" Robin Hood said, compressing his lips.

"I doubt it not, good sir. I told Arden my tale of misery, and he has brought me all these long miles to see you."

"And Arden did well," Robin Hood replied. "Follow yonder path until you are challenged by a Bowman in Lincoln green. I will have more talk with you anon. Be of good heart. With the help of Heaven and my good men, your daughter Gwendoline shall be restored to your arms. Nay, nay! I'll have no kneeling to me. I am a monarch, but not such a one as wears a crown and lives in gilded palaces. I claim no homage. Away! tell the man you see to conduct you to my retreat; all will be well then. Eat, drink, and rest until I return."

"Robin," Maid Marian said, placing her hand upon his arm. "Heaven will reward you for this. You will rescue this poor, hapless child?"

"If I fail, you will lose the man that loves you," the outlaw replied. "Yes, Marian, I will rescue her or perish."

An hour later Robin Hood had a second interview with Lorraine, and then a more protracted one with Arden.

"Tell me," Robin said, "is there any possibility of obtaining admission to the castle without storming it?"

"I know not of any secret outlet," Arden replied, shaking his head. "Even the posterns are of tremendous strength."

"There is no moat, and consequently no drawbridge," Robin Hood said musingly. "I must think of some plan. Would it not be possible to reach the ramparts by driving staples into the walls?"

"There are the sentinels to be considered," Arden rejoined. "Their number is increased from three to six at sundown."

"I'll find a way to silence them, fear not," Robin Hood said grimly. "If they are all I and the men I take with me have to encounter, it will be but an incident in my life."

Night fell upon the scene.

In a space sheltered by trees two tents were raised for the accommodation of Maid Marian and her attendants, while in the open glade others rose for Robin Hood and his men.

Robin Hood had not more than a score with him at the time.

Numbers were scattered about the forest, waiting to be called to arms. The winter had passed peacefully, the new Sheriff of Nottingham not having troubled himself about the outlaws, for fear of having to pass the long months as a prisoner in a cave, or sharing Oswald de Burgh's fate.

But there were harsh times coming for the foresters. Richard, the Lion-Hearted, had picked a war with France, and had waited for the stern weather to break to let loose the dogs of war.

Of this Robin Hood knew nothing, but he was soon to learn it in all its bitterness, for Prince John, once in power again, would leave nothing his cruel nature could devise to oppress the Saxons and exterminate the dwellers in Sherwood Forest.

The outlaw went to rest with an easy conscience and light heart. His bed was of the simplest kind, being nothing more than a heap of sweet-smelling rushes, but he was content.

At his side lay his trusty bow and quiver, and close to his hand was the sword he loved to yield in the cause of right and justice.

Friar Tuck came in to see him just before he closed his eyes.

"What of our minstrel!" Robin Hood asked.

"He slumbers soundly," Friar Tuck replied. "But as a precaution lest he should walk in his sleep I have tied his harp to his leg."

Robin Hood smiled as he gave the jovial friar his hand.

"Good-night," he said. "I am heavy with the fragrance of the forest. See that I am called early. To-morrow I start on a journey. Will you come with me?"

"If there be danger in the venture, will you go without me?" Friar Tuck demanded reproachfully.

"No," Robin Hood replied. "My men always fight best when you are present."

"Ah! so you say," Friar Tuck rejoined; "but'll I'll not take such flattering unction to my soul. They love to laugh at me, and I love to see them laugh. Good-night, noble chief, and Heaven watch always over you!"

The foresters, with one exception, slept peacefully under the starlit sky. Softly the breeze blew through the forest and came as softly to the glade.

All was still. Tom Ringer, with his sword resting in the hollow of his arm, heard nothing and saw nothing to cause him the slightest suspicion.

Soon the day would dawn, and then he, too, would rest with his head pillowed on his arm, after the manner of the foresters.

But had his eyes wandered oftener to the spot where Welstone, the minstrel, lay, he would not have been so easy in his mind.

In the dead of night Welstone suddenly raised himself on his elbow and took a sharp look round. Then taking a knife from his wallet, he severed the cord which Friar Tuck had so thought-

fully connected him with the harp, and began to crawl towards the tent where Robin Hood lay sleeping.

No serpent tracking its prey could have been more cunning or silent. He scarcely seemed to move, but still he went on inch by inch, crouching, writhing, with a long, gleaming dagger between his teeth.

He raised the canvas door of the tent and stole in. His heart beat with excitement and exultation.

Gold!—gold!—gold! He seemed to bathe his hands in it, he swam in it, and it jingled with the music of thousands of tiny bells in his ears.

One blow, sure and swift, and he was rich for ever.

Sir Justin Antoine had told him so.

The knight had sworn it, and shown him the coffer filled with the glittering, precious metal which was to be his if he proved that Robin Hood was dead.

Welstone raised his dagger, and then, unable to control himself, hissed out:

"Die!"

The word had scarcely passed his lips when Robin Hood's hand was upon his throat, and the dagger fell from his unnerved and powerless hand.

Robin Hood had awoke in the nick of time, and shot out his hand as his quick eyes caught the gleam of steel. He held the would-be murderer in a grip of iron. No word escaped the suffocating wretch. His eyes started from the sockets, but still Robin Hood held him in such a clutch a man puts on a dog he expects a bite from.

In this manner the outlaw rolled from his humble couch and pressed the villain to the earth.

"Assassin!" he hissed, relaxing his grasp a little, "tell me by whose instigation you have done this!"

"Will you have mercy if I tell you?" Welstone groaned.

"That is for me to consider. Speak, or you die."

"I am in the hire of Sir Justin Antoine. He set me on, and promised me gold if I—— Oh, mercy! you are choking me."

"I am not surprised at your confession, for I suspected you from the first," Robin Hood said. "Listen! You know

Blackmoor Castle. In what part of it is Gwendoline Lorraine imprisoned?"

"In the northern turret. Her apartment faces the lane of elms that runs by the side of the wood."

"You have done me some service," Robin Hood said. "Ho, there!"

Tom Ringer came running in, and after him Friar Tuck, rubbing his eyes.

"This rascal came to murder me, as well as to play his harp," Robin Hood said. "Take him away, and let my men deal with him as they will."

CHAPTER 5.

The Fair Captive. — Will Scarlet to the Rescue.

Four days had passed since Lorraine had met Robin Hood in the forest.

It was evening, and the moon shone pale and uncertain through the flimsy clouds that drifted o'er Blackmoor Castle.

On the ramparts paced some armed men, keeping a sharp lookout and talking in whispers when they met face to face.

They were looking for the man who, in the guise of a minstrel, had gone to Robin Hood's secret lair.

"He has failed," said one of the sentinels. "Did I not say that he was too confident?"

"Wait a while," another remarked. "He may have lost his horse, or it may have fallen. A hundred things happen to a man on such a journey. Hlist! what is that?"

"I heard nothing."

"No; but look yonder! See that figure! It holds a harp in its hand. Why, it is Gaspard himself."

"Come, then; we'll to the gate and admit him."

Two of the sentinels passed down the path behind the ramparts. Their companions heard them open and shut the gates, and then all was still.

"They are talking to Gaspard," said one, calling the spy by his proper name. "How quiet they are!"

"So quiet that I like not their silence. Listen! What was that—a fall? Oh, Heaven, I am killed!"

The man staggered and fell over the

wall with an arrow through his body, and ere the others could recover from their terror and surprise they were seized, gagged, bound, and thrown in a heap in the dark shadow of the wall.

Not an echo of sounds as were caused by this sudden attack on the sentinels were heard within the castle.

It was not yet late, but thick clouds came rolling up, making the night unusually dark.

High up in the northern turret a solitary light burnt, and now and then the face of a beautiful girl, framed in golden hair, would come to the window and look wistfully out.

This was Gwendoline Lorraine. For weeks she had been a prisoner, seeing nothing of Sir Justin, but hearing how his health improved daily.

Pygoras had paid her several visits, reasoned with her, and declared that the knight was determined to marry her. He said that a priest had taken up his residence in the castle expressly for the purpose of performing the wedding ceremony when Gwendoline should express her willingness to receive Sir Justin as her husband.

But the girl declared that she would rather die than marry such a scoundrel.

An old toothless hag had been brought into the castle to look after her, and poor Gwendoline often thought that she must go mad, and constantly prayed for death to put an end to the agony of her mind.

Tired with watching on this night, she had thrown herself dressed on her couch, when she fell into a state of half-swooning, half-sleeping. When the girl recovered her senses she found the hag bending over her, administering restoratives.

Gwendoline had been removed into another room. All that met her eyes was strange, and she gazed around her bewildered and amazed. She was lying on a couch of costly materials, rich hangings fell from the lofty windows, and on a table at her side were wine and fruit such as might have tempted anyone not overcome with grief and despair.

"Where am I?" cried the wretched girl.

"You are safe enough, little one. Why tremble?" replied the old woman. "Ho, ho! Would that I were young again, and had your chance of being a great lady!"

"Safe!" Gwendoline exclaimed. "I shall not be safe until I am beyond the walls of this accursed place. Oh, father!" she moaned, hiding her face amid the cushions. "They tell me that you are dead! Would that I had died with you! Woman, have you no pity?"

"Why ask me? I am but a slave, but——"

"Confounded hag!" cried a deep voice. "Is this the way you obey my orders?"

Sir Justin Antoine strode into the room, and Gwendoline, starting to her feet, took up her station near the window.

"I cry your pardon, fair damsel," Sir Justin said, addressing her in cultured tones, "for the means I have taken to make my apologies to you. Nay, start not from me. I love you. Listen! I offer you my hand, my wealth. Reign here, queen of this great household. You are already queen of my heart."

"Away!" Gwendoline exclaimed. "I scorn you and your offer! I see baseness in it, although it is couched in smooth, knightly words. Away, I say! Heaven will raise up a friend to protect the poor Saxon girl."

"You had better reflect," Sir Justin Antoine said. "You are in my power. There is no champion here to aid you."

"You speak truly for once with your false tongue," Gwendoline said. "There is no being worthy of the name of man within these walls, otherwise you would not be standing where you are to insult a harmless girl."

"Beware! Keep a curb on your tongue, lest you rouse me to fury!" Sir Justin cried hoarsely.

"I defy you, craven knight!" Gwendoline continued. "There is yet a way to safety, although it be through the gates of death."

So saying, she swung the latticed casement of the window open and leaped upon the broad sill.

"Now, Norman," she cried, "you shall see how a Saxon maiden prefers

death to marrying a bad man. Advance one step, and I will throw myself from this giddy height!"

Sir Justice Antoine stood transfixed with surprise and horror.

"Come back!" he cried. "I will leave you, and never return. By the sword I wear I swear that I will not seek to trouble you again with my attentions. Come down, foolish maiden, and do not imperil your life needlessly."

"I have no faith in your word," Gwendoline said.

"By the bones of my dead mother, I give you my sacred word!"

"I will remain here until you have left the chamber," Gwendoline replied. "Away! Advance but one step, and I will leap down!"

"I will leave you, then," Sir Justin said.

His face had grown deathly, with beads of clammy perspiration bursting from it, and he tottered, as though grown suddenly weak, as he swung himself round on his heels and disappeared through the door, which he closed.

"Shall I return?" Gwendoline said musingly, as she gazed into the awful darkness all around her. "Would it not be better to end my miseries now? One prayer for mercy, one leap, and then——"

"Hush!" said a voice. "Return to the room. Oh, Heaven! what agonies I have suffered clinging here and watching you!"

"Who speaks?" Gwendoline demanded, suppressing a shriek.

"Will Scarlet, one of Robin Hood's followers. I have come to save you. I bring with me a rope to lower you down."

"Can it be true?" demanded Gwendoline, in a transport of joy.

"Yes, it is as true as the sun will break through the darkness of the night," Will Scarlet replied. "But, hush! Go back, and utter not another word until I am with you."

"Just one. Is my father dead?"

"No; he is alive and well, sheltered in Sherwood Forest."

"Heaven be praised!" Gwendoline said, leaping back into the room.

Will Scarlet then seized the sill with

his hands, drew himself over it, and slid lightly into the room.

His had been a most perilous journey, he having had nothing but bits of iron, driven by his own hand between the blocks of masonry, to hold on to.

Anguish had been his when he had discovered, by the moving of lights, that Gwendoline had been removed from one room into another, for then his work had to be done all over again. But, as luck would have it, he found some projections, over which the roots of ivy had grown, and trusting to Heaven and his courage, which had never yet failed him, he climbed high enough to hear what was being said, and to see Gwendoline dart from the window.

Round Will Scarlet's waist was wound a long cord, with a loop of softer material at one end.

"Slip this under your arms, and fear not," he whispered. "Clutch at anything that may come in your way, to lessen your weight; but fail not to continue your descent. Strong men are waiting to catch you in their arms. Oh, Heaven! what cruel fate is this? We are undone!"

The door flew open, and Sir Justin Antoine, with Pygoras and four men-at-arms, burst into the room.

At the same moment there was a babel of voices on the ramparts, quickly followed by savage cries and the clash of steel.

And then silence, for Robin Hood, who had attacked the castle in the hope that he would be able to cover Will Scarlet's perilous attempt at rescue, had been unable to cope against such odds as had been hurled against him, and had been compelled to retreat.

In the meanwhile, Gwendoline had been dragged shrieking from the room, and Will Scarlet lay beaten down and senseless on the floor.

Noble and brave indeed had been his effort to rescue the fair captive.

Alas! what would be his fate now?

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CHAPTER 6

At the Mercy of a Norman Tyrant.

DAWN came sluggishly through the trees of a wood about two miles from Blackmoor.

The light filtered reluctantly through the foliage of a great oak tree, the branches of which sheltered Robin Hood, Little John, Roderick Maine, and Friar Tuck.

All were more or less hurt, but the friar's skill had stood them in good stead, and their wounds gave them little pain.

"We are beaten, but not disgraced," Little John said. "Nay, chief, look not so glum. We will have Will Scarlet back with us again."

"The plan I put so much faith in failed," Robin Hood replied. "When we had captured the sentinels I thought that all was well; but keen eyes must have been watching us all the time. Ah! well, it cannot be helped. Poor Will! I fear that his fate is sealed."

"My faith!" said Friar Tuck, trying to speak cheerfully. "Will Scarlet was not born to die in the dungeon of a Norman castle. Come, let us lighten our wallets. We must eat and drink, or we shall grow weak and mopish. By the rood! we ought to be thankful that we are alive."

"You put fresh courage into my heart with so cheery words," Robin Hood said. "But what can we do?—unless we return to Sherwood, summon the foresters, and march upon the castle. By that time——"

"Pardon for interrupting," Little John said, "but on the principle that there are many more ways than one to kill a goose, so there may be others to find a way into the castle without storming it."

"If I could only think so I would be content." Robin Hood said. "By Heaven! I would go alone, and though they hacked me to pieces afterwards that villian Sir Justin Antoine should die!"

At the peril of falling backwards, Friar Tuck raised his knees and embraced them with his arms.

"Arden has our horses," he said.

"At least, he has sent them to a farmer friendly to our cause to be taken care of. There are Saxons in this part of the country who would be willing to lend us a helping hand."

"Many!" Robin Hood assented. "But how, in the name of Heaven, are they to be brought together?"

"Ay, there's the rub!" said Little John. "Chief, we must risk a visit to the 'Saracen's Head,' and hold council with closed doors. This wood will soon become too hot to hold us. Sir Justin's men will come out in force, and I trow they will leave no tree unsearched."

"To the 'Saracen's Head,' then," Robin Hood said. "Sitting here, damp with dew and aching bones, will do no good. Perhaps there may be a way to rescue poor Will and Gwendoline; but if so, it will be nothing less than a miracle."

Descending from the oak, they passed through the wood and entered a lane with hedgerows so high that the tops of the hawthorns nearly met.

"Keep back," said Little John. "I hear the sound of wheels."

"St. Anthony is always good," Friar Tuck remarked. "Here is a gap large enough for all of us to crawl through."

As they lay under the bank a wagon piled high with sacks, drawn by a team of six heavily plodding oxen and driven by a sleepy-eyed man, came lumbering along.

"This man looks honest and bears the stamp of a Saxon on his features," Robin Hood said. "I'll speak to him. Hey, friend! a word with you."

The oxen seemed to stop of their own accord, and the driver looked everywhere and anywhere but in the right direction until Robin stood before him.

"You are early ahead, neighbour," the outlaw said.

"And so are you," replied the man, swinging the thong of his whip round his head. "But what does it matter to you whether I drive by night or day?"

"Civility costs nothing," Robin Hood replied. "I am a stranger in these parts, and wondered at seeing you. If there be harm in that, I crave your pardon, and am willing to pay a crown."

The man's stern face relaxed into a smile.

"Forsooth," he said, "I took you for anything but an honest man. I thank you, sir. Know you not that this is the day that Sir Justin Antoine receives rent and toll from his Saxon tenantry?"

"No! Did I not say that I am a stranger?"

"Well, 'tis true, then, as certain as I am Walter Purdy. Money I have none, so I bring the Norman corn, and if he lets me depart with my oxen and wain I shall hold myself lucky."

"Where is the rent taken?" demanded Robin Hood, suppressing his excitement.

"In the courtyard of the castle," Purdy replied. "There will be some hundred of us there, and—but I am letting my tongue run too fast, for you may be on friendly terms with Sir Justin Antoine."

"I, being a Saxon, love him as I do all Normans," Robin Hood replied.

"Give me proof of that," said Purdy.

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes; and if you could only show me the way of saving my corn, I would call Heaven's blessing down on your head."

"Well, it matters little whether you prate of what I say or not. I am Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest."

"Then, 'fore Heaven, I love you indeed," Purdy cried, springing down from the wagon. "What has brought you here?"

"That you shall learn anon; but what was it you were about to say when you put a curb upon your tongue?"

"That we Saxons, fearing a massacre, go to Blackmoor Castle secretly armed," Purdy replied. "And for why? Some of our neighbours have disappeared mysteriously, and it is whispered that they are groaning out their lives in dungeons beneath the castle."

"Good! The Saxons are secretly armed, and number a hundred. At what time does Sir Justin Antoine appear in the courtyard?"

"He has fixed the hour of two, the usual time," Purdy replied. "But he may be later, as he does not mind keeping us Saxons waiting."

"Listen to me, Purdy," Robin Hood said. "If I could, I would put a seal on your lips, lest you whispered of this meeting between us. If you do so, your greatest chance will fall to the ground. I have but three trusty men with me to accomplish the mission I set forth upon; and if it fails two valuable lives will be sacrificed."

"I swear that torture shall not wring a word from my lips," Purdy declared.

"Thanks, honest friend. Go you straight to the castle now?"

"No; I rest my team near the 'Saracen's Head,' and await the time for the castle gates to be thrown open."

"I will see thee anon," said Robin Hood, waving his hand. "But wait! you shall see my trusty friends."

Friar Tuck, Little John, and Roderick Maine appeared.

"We'll have a password between us four," Robin Hood said, "and it shall be 'The bow is bent.' Remember; and now adieu until we meet again."

At the time that the wagon was rumbling and jolting on its journey, and Robin Hood and his friends were making their way with all possible haste towards the "Saracen's Head," Will Scarlet lay, bound hand and foot, in so small a dungeon that his feet and head nearly touched the walls.

At his side sat Pygoras, the physician, with a small, bright instrument in his hand, and over both towered the form of Sir Justin Antoine.

"Why not say the word and let me put an end to him," Pygoras said. "Such a man as this is better dead than alive."

"No, he shall suffer worse tortures than bleeding to death," Sir Justin said. "That would be but a poor revenge. Does the varlet hear what we are saying?"

"He gives no sign," Pygoras replied; "but I trow he knows well enough where he is and what is passing. Ho, there, fellow! What name are you known by?"

Will Scarlet opened his eyes and smiled.

"That you will never know from me," he said.

"Perdition!" Sir Justin hissed.

"Why waste breath in questioning him? Is it not sufficient that he is a follower of Robin Hood? Does his dress not proclaim it?"

"That," said Pygoras, "is more the reason why we should make him speak. I'll open one vein, and, perchance, as he feels his life's blood ebbing he will not be so bold."

Sir Justin twisted the lancet from the old man's hand and crushed it under his foot.

"Go, dotard, and mind your own business," he said. "I will talk to this knave."

"I saved your life not long ago," Pygoras said, rising and gathering his robe round him. "Take care that you keep it, since the next wound may not be so easy to heal."

"By my sword! That sounds like a threat."

"No; it is intended for a warning. This rascal came not alone, although the rebels were but few and easily beaten. But there are others in the Forest of Sherwood, and unless you decide quickly they will be here before you take your revenge."

Sir Justin's face grew black with rage.

"Such talk is more fit for a jester than a wise man," he said. "I have been warned, and to be warned is to be forearmed. I'll promise that my men and my castle walls are strong enough to keep Robin Hood and all his rebels at a safe distance."

"Since that is your opinion, 'twere idle for me to say more," Pygoras said. "Sir Knight, I have spoken. Blame me not if you have reason to think of my words with regret."

"Now, my pretty bird in red-and-green," said Sir Justin, turning to Will Scarlet when they were alone. "The act you performed last night did you credit, but there are things which may he admired yet deserve punishment. Need I tell you how I shall punish you?"

"If your aim is to make me cry for mercy, you may hold your peace," Will Scarlet said. "I am your prisoner, so do your worst, and what that is I can easily imagine, base tyrant."

"So you think," Sir Justin responded,

smiling grimly. "There are secrets locked up in my castle which few men dream of. Secrets which, if I divulged them to you, would make your hair stand on end, and your lips cry out in piteous appeal that the hand of death might touch you."

"I have been told that one of the chief amusements of the Norman nobility is to vie with each other in the art of torture," Will Scarlet replied, unmoved. "Talk on; I'm weary, and will fall asleep again."

"Let what may be said of them, these Saxons are wonderful men," Sir Justin muttered. "But is this fellow's defiance bravado or real courage? I will soon put him to the test. Varlet, your pretence of going to sleep will not deceive me. You shall answer me, or I will wring the words from your throat."

"What, you will not let me rest?" said Will Scarlet. "Say on, then."

"Know you one called Roderick Maine?"

"I have heard of him, and so have you," Will Scarlet retorted.

"Tis said that he has enlisted with Robin Hood."

"All the stories that gossips tell are not lies," Will responded, yawning.

"You mean——"

"Pshaw!" Will Scarlet interrupted, with a sneer as he rose to his feet. "What is the use of telling you what you already know? You have seen Roderick Maine in Robin Hood's company, and, if I mistake not the man I am talking to, you have tasted the quality of his steel."

"I'll know more of you yet!" Sir Justin hissed. "You shall tell me where Robin Hood can be found—his haunts, his customs, the strength of his forces, and where his weakness lies."

"I'll tell you the last without reservation," Will Scarlet replied. "His weakness lies in showing mercy to any Norman that crosses his path. He should have made sure that you were dead before leaving you."

Sir Justin raised his mail-gloved fist, as if to bring it down with terrific force on Will Scarlet's face, but he dropped his arm to his side.

"No," he said, striding to the door;

"a blow would be but poor punishment. You shall suffer a thousand agonies!"

"It will be all the same when the end comes," Will Scarlet replied lightly. "Stay yet a moment. You may carry out your threats, and torture me until I die, but for every pang I suffer a dozen shall be yours. Monster, do your worst! Even now, although you see it not, the sword of vengeance is hanging over your head."

With these words ringing in his ears, Sir Justin left the dungeon, and bidding the two men on guard to keep strict watch over the prisoner, he strode to the next floor and stopped before a massive door.

A burly henchman lowered the point of his sword at his approach.

"Where is Menna?" Sir Justin asked.

"She is with the maiden."

"Stand aside; I will go in."

"Menna says that the girl is so distraught that she fears for her reason," the henchman said.

"I need no information from you, churl," Sir Justin said. "Open the door."

As he entered he saw Menna, the shrivelled old hag, bending over Gwendoline.

It was a sight that might have moved a heart to pity, but mercy and pity were unknown to the Norman's heart.

The poor girl lay in a dead faint. She had been unconscious, save at rare intervals, for hours; but she talked in her delirium, and of nothing but the innocent days of happiness she had spent in her old home in the open country.

"Something must be done, or she will die," the old woman croaked.

"Have you consulted Pygoras?"

"Yes."

"And what said he?"

"Nothing," Menna replied. "He merely shrugged his shoulders and pointed upwards."

"Listen, hag," Sir Justin said; "I would not have the maiden die for all I possess. I love her!"

"Yes, you love her. Ha, ha!"

"Why do you laugh, beldame?" Sir Justin demanded.

"If you love her you would not keep

her here, where everything reminds her of captivity—and you.”

“She shall be removed to my own apartments; she shall have flowers and music. Pygoras shall save her, or he shall die,” Sir Justin said. “What can have come over the old villain? He brought me to life, but since then he has done nothing worthy of a common apothecary.”

“Perchance his patron, the devil, has grown tired of him,” the old woman sniggered. “Well, Sir Justin, I am your slave and will do your bidding. The maiden shall be removed at once. Another leech must be sent for, and a priest.”

“A priest! If she dies, will she not go to Heaven without the mumbling of prayers?”

“Would you deny her the consolation of the Church?”

“No. Where shall I find a priest? The monks of St. Jude’s monastery would as soon enter my castle as plunge themselves willingly into the flames of purgatory.”

“I trow that a holy father might be found down in the village. Pilgrims are often passing through.”

“I leave it all to you, Menna,” the knight said. “Save her if you can.”

“I will,” the old woman said as the door closed behind the knight. “I will save her from you. I will give her the means of escaping from your clutches,” she added, taking a dagger from a fold of her dress. “If she sends you to perdition first, and herself to Heaven afterwards, so much the better! Poor child! They call me hag and witch; but there is some good left in me yet!”

CHAPTER 7.

The End of Sir Justin Antoine.

FRIAR TUCK sat in the kitchen of the “Saracen’s Head,” his eyes directed at a farm in the distance, to which Robin Hood, Little John, and Roderick Maine had gone.

Arden, on being consulted, had urged that they should hasten to the friendly farmer and borrow some clothes such as the labouring men wore, for the purpose of disguise.

We shall see how this idea worked out.

“Friend Arden,” said Friar Tuck, “it seems strange to me that Sir Justin Antoine allowed you to remain here unmolested after what took place.”

“I have many friends, and the people were on my side,” Arden replied. “What could I do against armed men, on a wintry night, when most people were in bed?”

“True,” said the friar. “Some people have the knack of being asleep when danger is at hand. It is a convenient habit; and I, as a man of peace, ought to practise it; but such is my temperament that I must know what is going on. Hist! someone approaches. I will draw my cowl over my face and step into the next room.”

A henchman wearing Sir Justin’s livery came striding in.

“What can I have the pleasure of serving you, Will?” Arden demanded.

“I came not to drink, but on a more solemn mission,” the henchman replied.

“Indeed,” Arden said, rising and walking to the window. “I pray you make not so much noise with your sword. In yonder room there is a priest saying his office for the day.”

“Say you so?” the henchman rejoined. “Then I am in luck, indeed. I am sent to find a priest. Bring him to me, and I will take him with me at once to the castle.”

“What has happened? Is Sir Justin ill again?”

“No; but one of his guests—a young lady—is sick unto death.”

“A young lady, say you?”

“Yes. The girl is Gwendoline, daughter of Lorraine.”

“Ah! I heard that the maiden had been missing from her home.”

“She is likely to be missing from the earth,” the henchman said. “Call the priest hither, or I will fetch him with my own hands.”

At that moment Friar Tuck, bent nearly double and leaning heavily on his staff, hobbled into the kitchen.

“My son,” he said, “it is my duty to give the consolation of the Church to all. What’s that? Payment? Ch, that I will leave to the noble Sir Justin

Antoine. But how comes it that he sends for a poor beggar like me instead of to the rich priory of St. Jude?"

"He and the abbot have long been at loggerheads. The monks have been forbidden to enter Blackmoor Castle."

"Does that mean that Sir Justin has been excommunicated?" demanded Friar Tuck, chuckling under his cowl.

"I suppose so; but I neither know nor care," the henchman said. "Give me your arm, father, and I will help you along. Faith! you are not like the sturdy priest who came here last year to crack skulls."

"I am a man of peace, and my mission is to mend hearts, not to crack skulls," said Friar Tuck, still chuckling.

As he limped along the monk thought that all was going as if directed by the hand of Heaven.

On entering the castle he was taken at once to Gwendoline.

"Woman," he said, turning to Menna, "I must ask you to retire. I observe that this poor child is rallying somewhat from some great shock. Retire, I pray, for no priest can hear a confession in the presence of a third person."

Menna made no demur, but retired at once.

"Maiden," Friar Tuck whispered, bending low, "your face reminds me of a worthy man I once met. Is your name Lorraine?"

"It is. But—oh, Heaven! who are you?"

"Hush! not so loud. Robin Hood is not far away, and is coming to save you and the brave lad Will Scarlet, who so gallantly attempted your rescue."

"Am I dreaming? This sounds too delicious for belief?"

"It is true," Friar Tuck replied. "Robin Hood has hit upon a plan which can scarcely fail. Believe me that it will be no fault of his if it does, and he has sworn to be victorious or perish!"

"Heaven bless him!"

"Amen to that!" said the friar. "That is a prayer said by hundreds of lips morn, noon, and night. Child, we must be cautious! What of the old woman just now? Is she your enemy?"

"She was, but she is now my friend," Gwendoline replied. "She has given me a dagger with which I may slay my persecutor or destroy myself if all hope be lost."

"The dagger will be better in my hands than yours," the friar said. "You might be tempted to do something rash at the very moment when rescue is at hand."

"You will not leave me?" Gwendoline said, surrendering the weapon.

"No, no. I will not be far away, trust me. There are people assembling in the courtyard, and I must see how things are going on. I will return in a few minutes."

The courtyard of the castle presented a busy scene.

Some of the Saxons had brought money, others goods, and some had come, hoping against fear to beg an extension of time.

Purdy's corn sacks were being carried in. Three sturdy labourers had come to him, offering their assistance, and each had whispered in his ear:

"The bow is bent!"

Soon with sacks on their shoulders they passed under the searching eyes of Sir Justin Antoine's retainers.

"Hol!" cried one. "Look at that fellow making as light of two sacks as though they were feather pillows. Giant, what name are you known by?"

"Goose," Little John mumbled. "You laugh; but still it is my name, and I cannot alter it. Let me pass! When I work I work, and when I play I play!"

"And when you fight you fight with a vengeance, I should think," the retainer said. "By Hercules, what arms the fellow has! I'd liefer take a blow from a blacksmith's hammer than from one of his fists."

And so the work went on, and the shadow of the sundial went round until it was nearly two o'clock.

It was almost on the strike of the hour when Sir Justin sought Gwendoline.

Friar Tuck was with her, holding her hand and speaking low.

"Well, father," said Sir Justin. "What of your fair penitent?"

"She has received consolation and comfort," Friar Tuck replied. "Noble Norman, she will recover and live many years."

"Say you so? Then you have removed a great load from my heart," Sir Justin said. "Go to my almoner, and he will give you gold."

"I pray you let me remain a little longer," Friar Tuck said.

"Hurry not on my account," Sir Justin said grimly. "I have a stern piece of business to do, and then I'll to the Saxon knaves outside. They shall have no mercy from me to-day."

"Nobleman," said the friar, "take back those words, lest they recoil on you."

"Tush! Keep your sermons for such as care to hear them," Sir Justin said. "I'll return anon."

"Perhaps," muttered Friar Tuck, deep in his throat.

Sir Justin Antoine hastened to the lower part of the castle.

"Ho, there!" he cried. "Bring the prisoner to the dungeon with the pit. I have altered my mind, and will rid him from my presence for ever."

In a minute Will Scarlet was dragged to his feet and hurried along to a spacious dungeon.

Poor Will, weak and bound, could do nothing to protect himself; but although he felt that the end was at hand, his face did not blanch, nor did his heart fail him.

Wolf-fang came in, and having raised a great flagstone, ran out again, crashing the door behind him.

"Look into that pit," said Sir Justin, pointing to the aperture. "I reserve that as the resting-place of my most distinguished guests. Down below are adders and serpents to keep you company."

"Villain! The flames of perdition will torture you through eternity!" Will Scarlet said.

"Down with him!" said Sir Justin, to the two henchmen who held Will Scarlet. "Out of sight with him! So much for one of Robin Hood's bold foresters."

They dragged him nearer and nearer towards the dreadful pit. Then through

the walls there came a strange medley of sounds like the roaring of voices in anger, and crash came the head of an axe through the door, splintering it and rending it as if it were paper.

It was Little John's axe. Will Scarlet was saved!

In rushed the giant, with Robin Hood and Roderick Maine.

The corridor was full of armed Saxons shouting:

"Sweet Liberty or Death!"

In a moment Will Scarlet's bonds were cut, and he was free.

Sir Justin fought his way through the throng, and, blind with spite and rage, fled, stumbling and blundering, with Roderick Maine following in hot pursuit.

Suddenly a door flew open, and Friar Tuck, supporting Gwendoline on one arm, rushed out and aimed a blow at the knight with his quarter-staff.

It brought him down, but only for a moment.

Up on his feet, he fled up the spiral staircase leading to the top of the highest turret, with Roderick Maine still close upon his heels.

Down below the Saxons, led by Robin Hood, were making short work of the retainers of Blackmoor Castle.

Horns were blowing in all directions, and more Saxons, led by Arden, were coming.

Sir Justin knew that his castle was doomed, but, worse than all, he knew that unless he killed the daring youth now so hot on his track his own doom was sealed.

As he reached the turret he turned and struck at Roderick with his sword, missed him, and the next instant received a crushing blow that sent him staggering across the lead-covered roof of the turret, to fall crashing into the courtyard below.

By this time the Saxons were masters of the place.

Robin Hood emptied the dead knight's coffers, and gave permission to the Saxons to loot the castle. This they did, setting fire to it afterwards, and while the red glow was still in the sky Robin Hood was on his way to restore Gwendoline Lorraine to her father.

And at Sherwood Forest important tidings awaited the outlaw chief, and there was more work for him and his merry men to do.

CHAPTER 8.

Robin Hood Triumphant.

OLD Much the Miller lived on the northern outskirts of Sherwood Forest, and although he was proud that his son sided and fought with Robin Hood in the cause of liberty, the old man kept his own sword sheathed, for he had done with war.

There were younger children and his devoted wife to look after, so he remained at his work, toiling from morn to night, while the mill went merrily round.

It was well known that Much had saved money, but where he hid it was a secret only known to himself and his good dame, for Norman fingers were always itching for what did not belong to them, and at any moment the tax-gatherer and his hirelings might pounce down and seize all. So Much and his family resided in a house built close to the mill wall, and now and then the eldest lad, called Much the Miller's son, paid them a visit by stealth.

One morning, as the miller was bearing a sack of flour on his shoulders to a cart, for the old man was still strong and hearty, he found himself confronted by four armed men.

A glance convinced him that they were Normans—licensed men of a court held twice a year at Nottingham. He guessed by their looks that they had come on no amiable errand, and, lowering the sack gently to the ground, folded his arms and waited for the leader to speak.

This man was better dressed than the others. His doublet was of a fawn-coloured kind of velveteen, his boots were of a superior quality, and he wore a silver chain, with badge bearing the city arms round his neck.

"Your name is Much," said he, raising a sealed scroll he carried in his left hand, while his right rested on the hilt of his sword.

"Even so," the miller replied, "and

I know of no reason why I should be ashamed of it."

"You have a son," continued the man.

"I have three."

"Where are they?"

"Two are at home, and one is away," Much replied. "What is your business with me? I see by your badge that you hold office at the Court of Enquiry. Speak out! I have done no wrong, and owe nothing to any man."

"You are right," the other said. "My name is Chaston, and I am head officer to the court. Which of your three sons is away?"

"The eldest."

"So my report tells me," Chaston said. "Where is he?"

"I cannot tell you. He is old enough to know his own will and earn his own living. He comes and goes as he likes, and never complains of hard times."

"Nor of his dress, which is of Lincoln green, I suppose?" Chaston observed, smiling grimly.

"Sir," Much replied, "you ask me strange questions. My son dresses in any colour that suits his fancy, for he does not ask me to pay for it."

"To make an end of this parley," Chaston said, "I hold a warrant for the arrest of your son, who is an arch-rebel, fighting with Robin Hood and his band against law and order and the prince of the crown."

"In that case," Much responded, "you must look further afield for my son. I have not seen him since a month come next Sunday."

"But," said Chaston, "you know that he is one of Robin Hood's valets—ay, and approve of it, too."

"You are the first man I ever met who could read my thoughts," Much retorted.

"Like the rest of Saxons, you are bold of speech," Chaston said sternly. "Listen! The warrant goes further. It sets forth that unless you produce your son within three days, and hand him into my custody, you will be held answerable for his absence, and in the meantime consider yourself under arrest."

"Does that mean that I am to be dragged to a dungeon because my son

sees fit to leave his home?" Much demanded.

"Not so! A chance will be given you. I and my men will remain here while you send for your son. If at the end of three days he does not appear, you will go with me to Nottingham and plead at the court."

Much's face darkened for a moment, but the shadow on it passed away as quickly.

"Come with me," he said.

He led the way to the house, where his wife and two sons were busy in the dairy.

"Henry," he said to a sturdy lad about fifteen years of age, "these gentlemen have come for your elder brother. Go, find him; deliver to him this message, and say that if he fails to come his father will be imprisoned."

The boy looked up with wonder written in his eyes; but he saw something in his father's face that kept his angry blood from rising and silenced the words that trembled on his lips.

"Very well," he said quietly; "I will go at once."

"Go; where?" Chaston demanded.

"To look for my brother; but, as far as I know, he may be hundreds of miles away."

"I see," said Chaston, "you have learned your lesson well without the aid of a book."

Henry Much picked up his cap and, tossing it on his head, sped away, and in a few moments was out of sight.

The youngster knew exactly where to go to, and having put two miles between himself and the mill he took matters more leisurely.

"There is plenty of time," he said. "I will find my brother, and he will return, but not alone."

Soon he struck into a path in the forest, and then began to take notice of the trees. Here a piece was chipped out of the bark, there a branch lopped off—all signs which the boy had been duly tutored in.

Evening brought him to Robin Hood's camp, and there he told his story to eager and willing ears.

"Only four Norman rascals at the mill, say you?" Robin Hood cried.

"Then four of our good men will be sufficient to drive them out. Ho! for those willing to start at once."

"I must go, for one," said Much the Miller's son, stepping forward.

"My lad," said the outlaw, "you have done enough already."

"When trouble comes to my father, it is my duty to be at his side," was the stout reply.

"Go, then," said Robin Hood.

"And I!" cried Dick Driver.

"And I!" exclaimed Ned Carter.

"One more," said Robin Hood, laughing at the young fellows' eagerness.

"Perhaps a man of peace might be called in to give a little sound advice—with a quarter-staff," Friar Tuck remarked slyly.

"Go, then," said Robin Hood; "and be sure that I will not be long after you. The old miller has not offended against any laws; his son came to me of his own free will, and, by Heaven, I will defend both!"

Many murmured because they were not allowed to partake in the expedition, but Robin Hood besought them to remain where they were.

"We can never tell when another storm may burst upon us," he said. "There was never a sky so clear without clouds forming."

Leaving young Henry to be entertained at Robin Hood's retreat, Much the Miller's son and his three sturdy supporters made good headway through the forest until darkness set in.

Finding a suitable tree, they rested amidst its sheltering branches until dawn.

A hearty breakfast was then eaten and their journey resumed.

By midday they came in sight of old Much's mill.

The great sails stood idle against the blue sky, and all was as quiet as if the place had been deserted.

After a short consultation it was arranged that young Much should advance alone, thus giving the Normans the idea that he had come to surrender.

What really happened we shall see presently.

Straight to the mill Much the

Miller's son went, whistling and singing.

His mother and father met him at the door, and stood amazed and terrified to see him alone.

They dare not ask any questions, for Chaston and his men were near at hand.

Chaston stepped forward and laid his hand on the young forester's shoulder.

"So," he said, "you saw the wisdom of surrendering."

"I came to see my good father and mother," young Much replied hotly. "Take your hand from my shoulder. Who are you, and what is your business?"

"I hold a warrant for your arrest," Chaston said.

"Keep on holding it," the miller's son rejoined. "But, stay, this is frightening my mother. Come into the mill, and I will see what the warrant sets forth."

Young Much led the way, the four Normans treading close upon his heels.

The miller himself remained at the foot of the ladder, scratching his head in perplexity. Dismay was in his heart, for he felt certain that his son had walked into the lion's jaws, otherwise he would have given some sign that help was at hand.

Seating himself on a pile of sacks, the young forester heard the warrant read. It called him rebel, traitor, and commanded Chaston to bring his body dead or alive to Nottingham.

"It would seem that I am in a bad plight," young Much said. "If fighting for freedom, the inheritance of every creature on this earth, makes a rebel and traitor, then I am one. But the man who prepared this warrant lies. I am no traitor, but a loyal subject of Richard, my king."

"All that you can state at the court of inquiry," Chaston said.

"So let it be," the forester replied. "I will go quietly with you on the condition that I am not bound. Bind me, and I swear that you shall carry me every inch of the way."

"I grant your request," Chaston said. Then, stooping, he whispered in young Much's ear: "If you will only divulge the place where Robin Hood lies at

night, I will give you my word that not only will liberty be restored to you, but many a broad piece of gold will jingle in your hands."

Much the Miller's son nodded his head and smiled. It was a smile that might mean anything; but Chaston took it as assent to his proposition, and began to see wealth and advancement for himself.

"Come, then," said he; "we will start without further delay. Bid your father be of good cheer, and say there is hope that you will see him again."

"That will I tell him, and right willingly," replied the miller's son. "Lead on; I am ready."

On descending the ladder the miller's son, instead of bidding his parents a sorrowful adieu, seated himself on the ground and burst into a roar of laughter.

"What ails the lad?" cried the miller, holding up his hands. "Is he mad?"

"Mad or not, he will find himself severely handled unless he conducts himself in a more seemly manner," Chaston said.

"Be not angry," young Much said. "A fancy entered my head and made me laugh. Strange things have fallen from the sky, and I was wondering what would happen if——"

A yell of pain from Chaston silenced young Much. An arrow had clipped the Norman's ear as closely as though a pair of scissors had been used, and the man, stung to madness, danced about as frantically as if his boots had turned red hot.

"Ha, ha!" cried Much the Miller's son, starting back and whipping a short sword from under his long-skirted doublet. "It rains foresters to-day. This way, Dick Driver and Ned Carter. This brave officer shall make a meal of his parchment warrant."

Out from behind a clump of bushes leaped Ned and Dick, fixing arrows to their bows, while Friar Tuck strode along at a furious rate, brandishing his quarter-staff.

"We are betrayed!" Chaston cried. "Back to the mill and secure the door!"

To the huge delight of the miller and his son, the four Normans clambered

up the ladder, and, tumbling over each other, reached the chamber of the mill, which was more than half-filled with sacks of corn.

"Miller," said Chaston, thrusting his white face through the window, "bid these men depart, or, by Heaven! we will set fire to the mill, even if we must perish in the flames."

Old Much answered him with a roar of defiance, and running into his house, returned with an iron-shod club, thick as his arm.

"We'll have the door down first, and talk of the fire afterwards," he said. "Rascals, you are caught, and not one of you shall live to tell the tale."

By this time the foresters had reached the gallery of the mill, and old Much, swinging the club over his head, brought it down upon the door with such tremendous force that it literally flew from its hinges.

By this time the Normans, finding that they had no alternative but to fight, had drawn their long, heavy swords, and stood at bay.

From the start the result of the conflict was a foregone conclusion. With justice on their side, the Saxons fought calmly, while the Normans cut and slashed wildly, vainly endeavouring to frighten their antagonists with shouts and savage cries.

At length, finding they were no match for the foresters, and being all more or less wounded, the Normans

surrendered, throwing down their arms with sullen anger.

Then three of them received a big surprise; for instead of taking them prisoners, the Saxons sent them running with a few smart blows, telling them to carry news of their defeat back to their masters.

Only Chaston remained, and he lay in a state of semi-consciousness as a result of a blow on the head which he had received just before the fight ended.

"What will you do with this Norman?" old Much asked.

"He shall return to the forest with us," his son said. "Robin Hood will keep him until the closing of the court of inquiry, and I trow that the so-called justices will find difficulty in finding a man to serve warrants in this part of the country."

Much the Miller's son kept his word, for as soon as Chaston's head was healed he was marched into the middle of a ring formed by Robin Hood and his men, and there made to devour a piece of the warrant.

Then, blindfolded, he was taken to an intricate part of the forest, and there left to find his way back to Nottingham as best he could.

When his story was told, the Normans in authority took a vow to avenge him, but that is a tale which has yet to be told.

THE END.

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